



Historic England

Later Prehistoric Shrines and Ritual Structures

Introductions to Heritage Assets



Summary

Historic England's Introductions to Heritage Assets (IHAs) are accessible, authoritative, illustrated summaries of what we know about specific types of archaeological site, building, landscape or marine asset. Typically they deal with subjects which have previously lacked such a published summary, either because the literature is dauntingly voluminous, or alternatively where little has been written. Most often it is the latter, and many IHAs bring understanding of site or building types which are neglected or little understood.

This IHA provides an introduction to Later Prehistoric Shrines and Ritual Structures. Two broad types of monument are described here: timber causeways and platforms with associated votive deposits in wetland or riverine contexts, which generally span the later Bronze Age and earlier Iron Age (about 1500 - 300 BC) and small 'shrine' buildings, sometimes within larger enclosures, which date to the later Iron Age (about 400 BC - AD 43), especially the last century or so before the Roman conquest. The shrines have a variety of contexts, some are associated with centres of population, within hillforts or enclosed settlements, while others appear isolated, with some evidence that they may be located near tribal boundaries, as a manifestation of political or economic activities. Human remains may be associated with both causeways and shrines, but rarely in large numbers. Identifiable features associated with shrines include pits, gullies, ditches and fence lines. A list of in-depth sources on the topic is suggested for further reading.

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Front cover

The excavated foundations of the possible shrine at Caesar's Camp, Heathrow, 1944.

Introduction

Information about pre-Roman religious beliefs in Britain and Europe is abundant but mostly indirect, with brief references in classical authors such as Caesar and a wide variety of much later (early medieval) written sources. Iconography and art history may also provide valuable insights but usually lack detailed context or chronology.

For Barry Cunliffe, the complex patterns of Iron Age religious beliefs are now ‘entirely beyond reconstruction’, though from the written sources it seems that the natural world was suffused by a pantheon of gods and spirits whose influence was mediated by ritual behaviour in everyday life as well as in specific seasonal religious activities overseen by specialists, or Druids. There were celestial gods, mother goddesses, cults of fertility, healing, and war, and everywhere a vigorous belief in the spirits of nature and place.

Sometimes these beliefs were manifested in propitiatory acts that have left an archaeological signature, in the form of votive deposits of metalwork, human or animal remains. These often occur in or at natural features like rivers, springs, bogs, caves, rocks and clumps of trees (the sacred groves referred to by classical writers), but are sometimes associated with built structures and enclosures, with which this description is primarily concerned. Information about such finds is collated by the Portable Antiquities Scheme and there is also a good deal of research on bog bodies, which appear to represent the remains of sacrificial victims.

Two broad types of monument are described here: timber causeways and platforms with associated votive deposits in wetland or riverine contexts, which generally span the later Bronze Age and earlier Iron Age (about 1500-300 BC) and small ‘shrine’ buildings, sometimes within larger enclosures, which date to the later Iron Age

(about 400 BC-AD 43), especially the last century or so before the Roman conquest. There is direct continuity between many of these latter sites and Romano-British temples that were established over, or close to, the pre-Roman shrines. The term ‘shrine’ is used loosely as it is not clear what specific ritual functions may have taken place, but these sites were probably the focus of activities involving communication with the supernatural.

Later prehistoric shrines and ritual structures rarely survive as visible earthworks or ruins. However, their presence may be indicated by aerial photography, geophysical survey, or the discovery of votive material mapped by fieldwalking or metal-detecting. Shrines are often found within Iron Age settlements or larger monuments such as hillforts, or where there is evidence of subsequent Roman cult activity.

Both shrines and ritual structures are known from many parts of the Celtic world. In Britain, shrines are not that common and at present the evidence suggests that most ritual activity took place in a domestic environment and as part of daily life. They are presently confined mostly to the south and east, although the important later Iron Age site of votive deposition at Llyn Cerrig Bach on Anglesey may have been associated with a causeway. Ireland, from which most of the later written evidence for Celtic religion derives, has much artefactual evidence for such practices but little by way of structural remains.

1 Description

The structures associated with votive deposition in wet places, consist of timber causeways or bridges, sometimes with platforms that may have supported structures. The best-known example, at Flag Fen near Peterborough, comprised a causeway of timber posts stretching for about 1 km across a Fenland basin; midway across was a large platform covering about 2 ha, while bronze objects such as swords, spearheads, daggers and pins were deposited in the water next to the post alignment. Other examples include the causeway/platform complex of similar scale at Shinewater, Sussex, and the causeway next to the river Witham at Fiskerton in Lincolnshire, which was at least 160 m long (Figure 1).

The classic Continental parallel for this type of site is the 'bridge' with associated metalwork deposits at La Tène in Switzerland. Often metalwork deposited in watery locations, has

been deliberately broken, perhaps representing a symbolic 'ending' of its original use.



Figure 1
View of causeway under excavation at Fiskerton, Lincolnshire.

Such sites are related to other types of prehistoric trackways, jetties and bridges but have a primarily ritual instead of a transport function (though some sites undoubtedly served both roles, for instance, the bridges at Eton Rowing Course, Buckinghamshire). The detailed appearance of collapsed and eroded wooden structures can be hard to reconstruct, e.g. the Fiskerton causeway can be interpreted either as a trackway laid directly on the peat or as a raised walkway.

At Shinewater the platform consisted of a solid timber base covered in brushwood and rush matting with a surface layer of gravel; it may have served as the foundation for buildings, unlike Flag Fen where the evidence suggests an open, perhaps discontinuous timber platform used for a variety of ritual activities.

The later shrines also pose many interpretative issues, but can be divided into three main types: small, rectangular 'cella'- type buildings, sometimes with a small external enclosure or 'ambulatory' and/or a porch; small circular structures, again sometimes enclosed; and large enclosures, which sometimes but not always contain one of the smaller sanctuary buildings.

The first type is exemplified by the shrine found in the 1940s during rescue excavations at Heathrow, Middlesex (Figure 2). Set amongst a group of circular house structures within a ditched enclosure, this comprised a central rectangular cella, approximately 5 m x 4.5 m in area, defined by a foundation trench and post-holes, and surrounded by a concentric rectangular enclosure of post-holes. Both circuits had entrances aligned to the east, and the cella may have been a small roofed building surrounded by a 2 m-wide ambulatory for processions and other ritual activity.

The rectangular pattern, with or without an 'ambulatory', is repeated in the majority of the thirty or more similar shrines now known, mostly from southern England. Their size is generally small, rarely exceeding 10m across, they often have entrances facing east or south-east, and are identified by foundation gullies, post-holes, or both; some, such as that at Cadbury Castle in Somerset, have a porch. They usually occur singly but are occasionally found in small groups: for example, four rectangular structures of varying size near the centre of Danebury hillfort, Hampshire, have been tentatively identified as

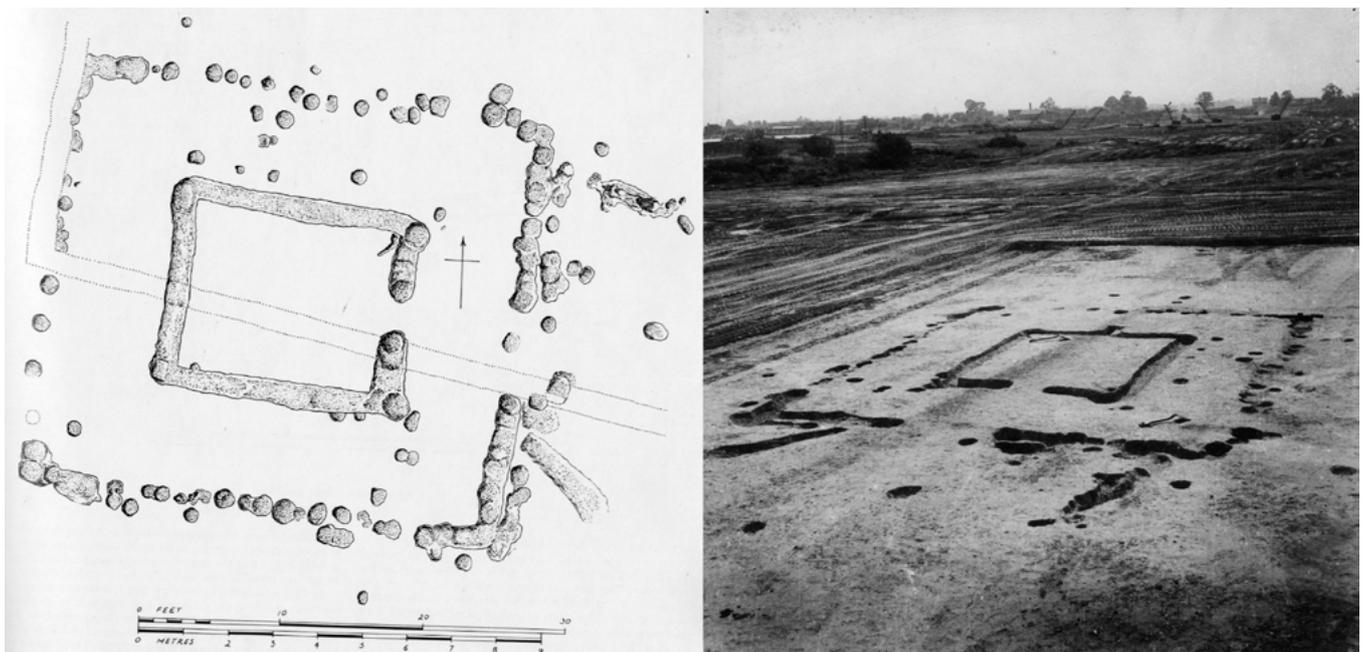


Figure 2
Left: ground plan of the possible shrine at Caesar's Camp, Heathrow. Right: photograph of the excavated foundations of the possible shrine, 1944.

shrines, though they lack suggestive depositional associations.

Further examples of rectangular shrines come from other hillforts (for instance, Maiden Castle, Dorset, where a post-built irregular rectangular shrine about 6 m x 3 m in area seemingly comprised two rooms), or settlements (for instance, Little Waltham and Stansted Airport Catering Site, both in Essex, the latter comprising a rectangular slot-built structure measuring 10 m x 7.5 m with large post-holes in the corners and an entrance to the west) or are associated with neither (for instance, Lancing Ring and Muntham Court, both in Sussex, and Uley, Gloucestershire, where there were two structures: one square arrangement of post-holes, the other trapezoidal with closely spaced circular posts in bedding trenches).

The rectangular shrines are architecturally distinct from Iron Age domestic structures, which are overwhelmingly round, but there are also some circular shrines, identified as such largely because they have Romano-British successors, so it is possible that other examples have been misinterpreted as domestic structures. Having said that, it would be unwise to assume that all rectangular structures could be interpreted as shrines and all circular structures as domestic. Circular shrines include an unusual penannular ditch at Frilford, Oxfordshire, enclosing post-holes and a pit, which was overlain by a Roman shrine, also circular (though the dating suggests there was not direct continuity); and a dry-stone-walled structure 8 m in diameter at Maiden Castle, close to the rectangular shrine already referred to.

This had an entrance to the south-east and an arrangement of post-holes forming a porch; the main 'street' through the east gate of the fort ran directly towards it. The Romano-British temple at Harlow, Essex, overlay a circular Iron Age building 13 m in diameter, which was associated with large numbers of coins.

Perhaps the best example of a circular shrine is that excavated on Hayling Island, Hampshire, in 1976-1982 (Figure 3). Here a ditched circuit 11 m in diameter surrounded a large pit which contained a variety of artefacts and may have been the foundation for a cult image. A porch opened eastwards onto a courtyard defined by a trench which may have held a fence. Outside this was a further, more substantial trapezoidal enclosure, approximately 24 m x 27 m in area. Both enclosures had east-facing entrances. Numerous finds were recovered from the courtyard and outer enclosure, while concentrations of stake-holes and burnt patches have been taken to indicate repetitive ritual activities.

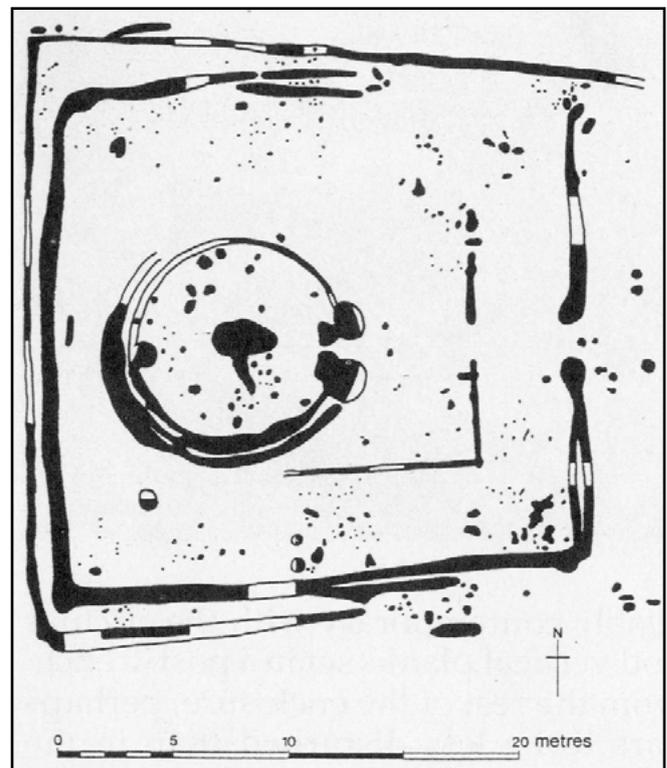


Figure 3
Ground plan of the shrine on Hayling Island, Hampshire.

While the shrine structures are uniformly small, not serving large congregations, it is clear from Hayling Island and elsewhere that they were often enclosed within a larger defined area of sacred space. These ditched enclosures can be of a very substantial scale, suggestive of major tribal centres for ritual activity. Some contained shrines, such as that at Harlow, which was oval in plan with a maximum diameter of over 300 m, and Fison Way, Thetford, Norfolk, which had dimensions of about 222 m x 165 m (Figure 4). Others, such as the approximately 78 m square multiple-ditched enclosure at Gosbecks Farm, Essex (the site of a later Romano-British temple), and the hilltop enclosure at Hallaton, Leicestershire, with a remarkable collection of finds dating to around the time of the Roman conquest, had no sign of inner sanctuary structures.

Rectilinear enclosures like Gosbecks may have parallels with a group of central European sites called Viereckschanzen, some of which may have had a cult function. What is clear is that formal demarcated sacred spaces were not the only expression of ritual practice and many locations probably had no temple or ritual structure at all. The hoards and associated features excavated at Hallaton, Leicestershire perhaps indicate the existence of an open-air shrine or sacred space at this hilltop site.

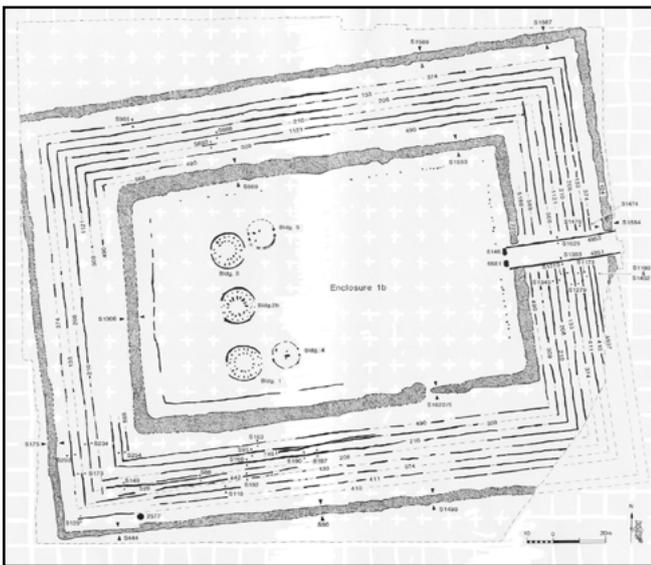


Figure 4
Plan of Period III shrines and enclosure at Fison Way, Thetford, Norfolk.

2 Chronology

The earliest timber causeway sites with formal metalwork deposits date to the mid-second millennium BC, for example at Vauxhall, London, and Testwood, Hampshire. Their origins may go back much further, however, since deliberate deposits have been found in association with Neolithic trackways, notably the Sweet Track in Somerset, while early Mesolithic deposition in the lake margins at Star Carr, North Yorkshire, close to a causeway or platform, may have had a votive aspect – but these were probably not primarily ritual structures. Flag Fen was a particularly long-lived site, established about 1300 BC and maintained for some 400 years. Other sites belong to the earlier Iron Age, with Shinewater dated to the 8th-7th centuries BC and Fiskerton in use during the 5th-4th centuries BC. It is notable that these all pre-date the site at La Tène, which was built around 250 BC.

The vast majority of shrines are later in date than the causeways, though their origins are vague and this remains an important area for future research. The oldest may be a Middle Bronze Age structure at Church Lammas, Surrey; this was 8 m sq, enclosed a large pit and was set within a rectangular enclosure, but the paucity of finds provides no direct evidence for its function. The rectangular structure at Maiden Castle is tentatively placed in the 4th century BC, while the shrines at Danebury are thought to represent a succession from the earlier to the later Iron Age, and the occupation at Heathrow may belong to the 3rd century BC, though it is possible the shrine is rather later.

Most shrines date to the end of the Iron Age and were often directly replaced by Romano-British temples which overlie or are modelled closely on their native predecessor. This certainly seems to be the case, for instance, with the circular shrines at Maiden Castle and Hayling Island and the rectilinear ones at Uley; late Iron Age dates are also indicated elsewhere by associated artefact assemblages, for instance, at Stansted where the shrine was constructed around 50 BC and dismantled in the early Roman period. In some cases, such as Fison Way and Cadbury Castle, it may have been the threat of Roman interference that stimulated shrine-building in the 1st century AD (Figure 5).

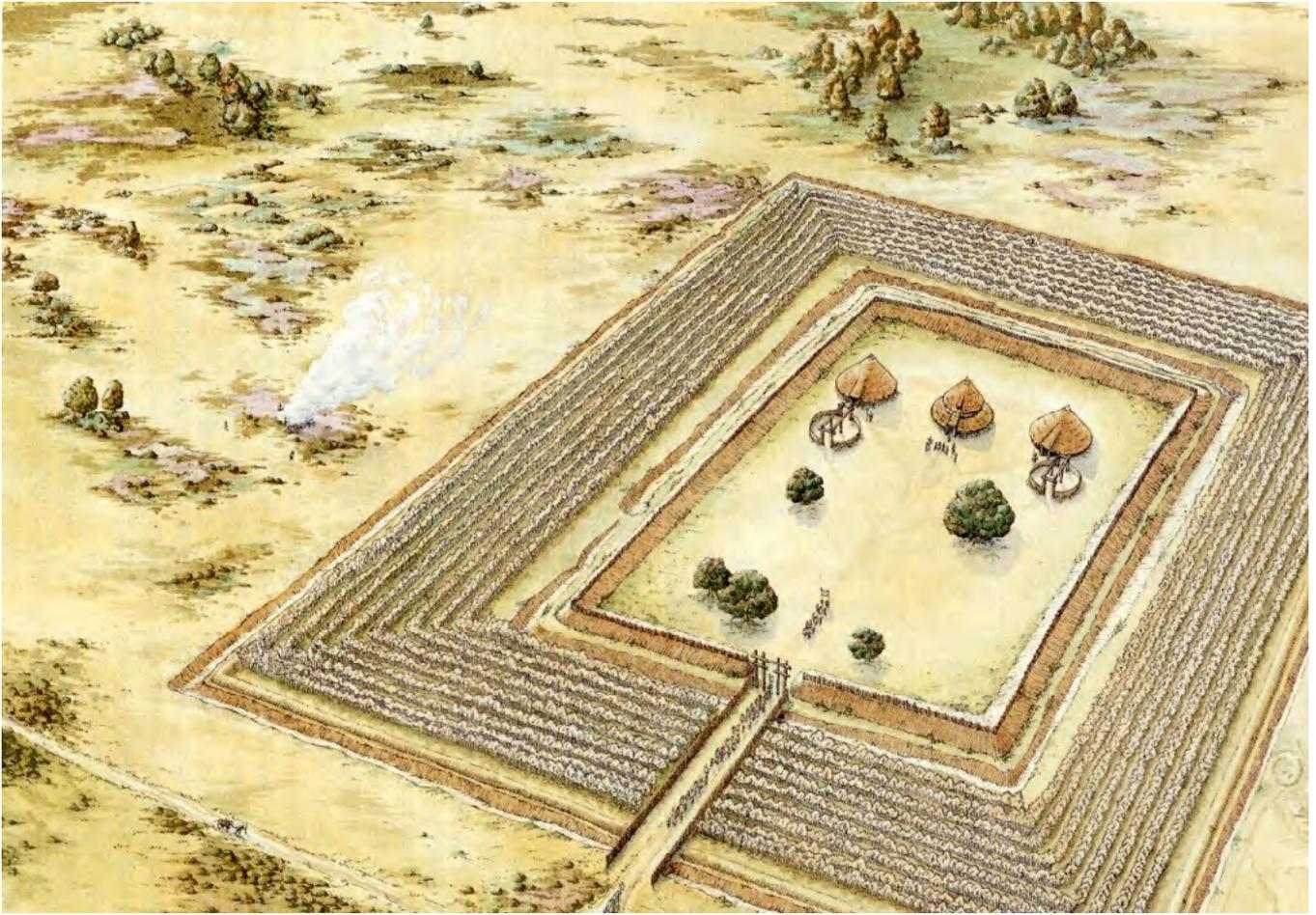
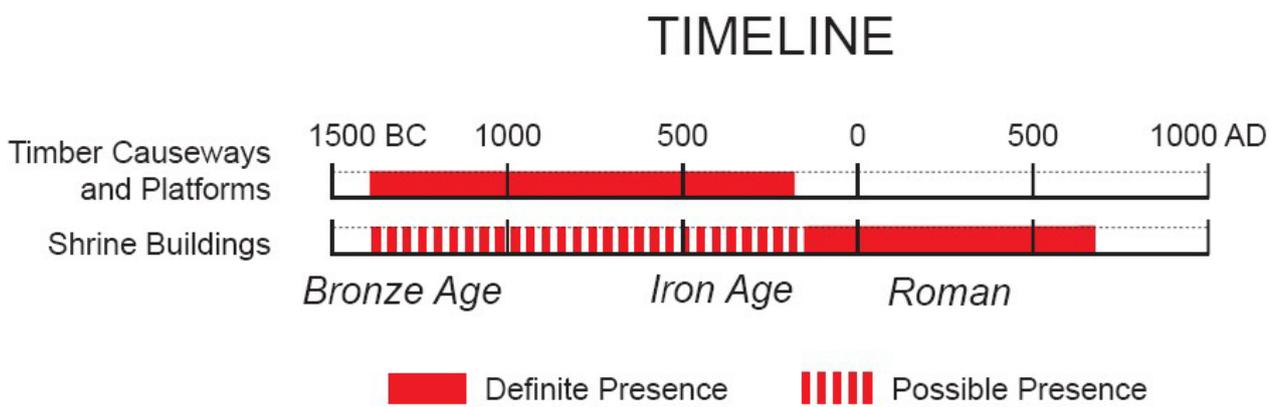


Figure 5
 Reconstruction of Period III shrines and enclosure at Fison Way, Thetford, by Piers Millington-Wallace.



3 Development of the Asset Type

If the earlier chronology of shrines is poorly understood, there is equally little evidence with which to explore how they developed over time. Instances where structural sequences have been revealed by excavation are too few or imprecise to define trends with confidence, and it may be the case that no simple sequence exists, shrines instead taking a variety of forms over a short space of time. Evidence for their development may have been obscured in many cases where excavation and analysis have been unable to distinguish ritual from secular activities (though the distinction between these categories in prehistory is often moot).

At Maiden Castle, the rectangular shrine was succeeded by the circular structure already mentioned. At Hayling Island, the circular shrine is also a late feature, but thought to be contemporary with its surrounding trapezoidal enclosure. At Uley the square, post-built structure was succeeded by the trapezoidal building. At Fison Way, Thetford, there is evidence for aggrandisement in the developmental sequence, with a single, possibly two-storey circular shrine within a rectangular enclosure replaced by an arrangement of three shrines and ancillary structures within an enlarged rectangular enclosure with a processional entrance way. This site has been interpreted as a tribal centre of the Iceni elaborated in response to tensions with the Romans, who may have subsequently demolished it in an act of suppression following the Boudiccan revolt of AD 60.

There is also little sense of the general chronological development of wetland ritual structures, partly because well-excavated examples are few in number, though in some cases high-precision dendrochronological dating has clarified sequences of use, such as the major episode of enlargement and renewal of the Flag Fen alignment in the early 11th century BC. At Fiskerton the dating has suggested possible ritual associations, since the major episodes of felling for the causeway posts seem to coincide in year and season with a series of mid-winter total lunar eclipses between 457/456 BC and 339/338 BC. The evidence from the later Iron Age ritual complex on Godwin Ridge, Cambridgeshire, suggests a ritual focus on a riverside platform with deposits including significant quantities of human remains in association with animal and bird sacrifice. Mortuary practices that involved interment in a watery place are known from the River Thames and other locations suggesting these wet places were special, ritual places.

4 Associations

In terms of landscape context, Flag Fen is perhaps the best understood timber causeway, the centre point of a remarkable prehistoric landscape that includes field systems on the dry ground, metalwork deposits along the Fen edge, and the remains of a remarkably well-preserved Late Bronze Age structure at Must Farm. The Fiskerton causeway, meanwhile, can be related to a collection of metalwork from the river Witham that spans the Bronze Age to the medieval period, suggesting there may be earlier and later ritual structures in the vicinity. The causeway/platform sites have some resemblances to a group of Late Bronze Age riverside settlements, such as Runnymede Bridge, Surrey, which are now seen to have substantial elements of ritual deposition, and can in turn be linked to terrestrial midden sites, like Potterne in Wiltshire.

The shrines have a variety of contexts, as discussed: some are associated with centres of population, within hillforts or enclosed settlements, while others appear isolated, with some evidence that they may be located near tribal boundaries, as a manifestation of political or economic activities (it has been suggested that some of the riverine timber causeways, such as Fiskerton, were also associated with boundaries). However, such apparent geographical patterning and associations may be a reflection of bias in excavation and interpretation, and could change as more examples are discovered. A few shrines are associated with much older ritual sites, including a Neolithic monument at Uley and a Bronze Age barrow at Haddenham, Cambridgeshire (where the main Romano-British shrine may have had a small rectangular Iron Age predecessor).

The artefactual associations of causeways have already been discussed. A similar range of objects may be associated with shrines, either as isolated finds or structured deposits in pits. The site at Frilford yielded an iron ploughshare as well as a miniature shield and sword of copper alloy. A

similar range of finds, including miniature spears and axes, as well as Iron Age coins, came from a pre-Roman temenos at Woodeaton, Oxfordshire. Votive hoards of coins have also been found at Hallaton, Leicestershire, along with other ritual deposits including copper-alloy brooches and copper-alloy ingots, a silver bowl and several parts of Roman cavalry parade helmets. Harlow, Essex, produced over 700 coins of the Catuvellauni and neighbouring tribes, suggestive of visitors from a wide area.

At Hayling Island a central pit contained pottery, brooches, coins and a piece of speculum mirror; a large number of other finds from elsewhere on the site include warrior gear (for instance, chain mail and spearheads) and chariot fittings (for instance, harness and bridle bits); there were also finger rings, amber beads and iron currency bars in an assemblage unmatched at other British sites. In contrast, many shrines, including Heathrow, have produced little or no artefactual material, though it is possible that many votive objects were of organic material which has not survived.

Animal remains are sometimes significant finds from shrine sites and are also indicative of ritual activity – presumably sacrifice and feasting. At Hayling Island the faunal remains were dominated by sheep, goat and pig, while at Harlow they point to the autumn slaughter of lambs. At Cadbury Castle the main shrine comprised a small cell with a floor area of 6.5m square and an open porch or portico oriented eastwards towards an area which contained at least 34 neonatal calf burials, though these may not be precisely contemporary with the structure.

Human remains may also be associated with both causeways and shrines, but rarely in large numbers. Occasional fragments of human bone were found at Fiskerton, Shinewater and Flag Fen, while infant burials seem to have been deposited at the time of construction of the circular shrine at Maiden Castle and both structures at Uley. More substantial evidence includes the cluster of inhumation graves (though no human remains survived) outside the ritual enclosure(s) at Fison Way, and the cremation activity at Westhampnett,

Sussex, where four structures interpreted as shrines were found adjacent to a Late Iron Age inhumation cemetery and a number of pyre sites.

However, it should be noted that structured deposits of human and animal remains (though only rarely metalwork) are commonly found in storage pits and roundhouses on normal ‘domestic’ settlements too.

Identifiable features associated with shrines include pits, gullies, ditches and fence lines. Pits and post-holes seem to have been sites of structured deposition in some instances, and at other sites they may have held standing stones, posts or trees which served as foci for ritual activity. The hilltop location of Hallaton was a setting for open-air ritual practices suggesting that particular places in the landscape were the principal factor behind ritual deposition, rather than a more formal demarcation of sacred space. Structure XVI at Uley was built around a large pit of this kind, raising questions about whether the shrine was actually roofed.

5 Further Reading

The best overview of votive deposits in prehistoric Europe is Richard Bradley's *The Passage of Arms* (1990), while the same author's *Ritual and Domestic Life in Prehistoric Europe* (2005) explores the inter-relationships between ritual and domestic activity.

For Celtic religion, *The Celtic World*, edited by Miranda Green (1995) includes chapters by leading authorities on Druids, sanctuaries and sacred places, the gods and the supernatural, and burial and the underworld.

Iron Age shrines in Britain are described in *Shrines and Sacrifice* by Ann Woodward (1992) while the main academic compendium, including a broader assessment of Iron Age religion, is *Ritual and Religion in Iron Age Britain* by Gerald Wait (1985).

Among the key sites published since 1985 are T Gregory, *Excavations in Thetford, 1980-1982, Fison Way* (1992) and Uley (A Woodward and P Leach, *The Uley Shrines*, 1993). V Score Hoards, *Hounds and Helmets. A conquest-period ritual site at Hallaton Leicestershire* (2012).

The major recent publications of timber causeway sites are Francis Pryor's *The Flag Fen Basin* (2001) and *Fiskerton* by Naomi Field and Mike Parker Pearson (2003).

For a discussion of a Late Iron Age ritual complex in a watery location see C Evans *Delivering Bodies into Waters: A Late Bronze Age Mid-Stream Midden Settlement and Iron Age Ritual Complex in the Fens*, *The Antiquaries Journal*, 93 (2013).

6 Where to Get Advice

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7 Acknowledgments

Cover: Caesar's Camp, Heathrow (as Figure 2)

Figure 1: Plate 1, in Naomi Field and Mike Parker-Pearson, *Fiskerton* (2003)

Figure 2: Left image, Figure 9 in W F Grimes and J Close-Brooks, *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society* 59 (1993). © Museum of London

Figure 3: Figure 33.2 in A King and G Soffe, *The Iron Age and Roman Temple on Hayling Island* (1994)

Figure 4: Figure 83 in T Gregory, *Excavations in Thetford, 1980-1982, Fison Way* (1992)

Figure 5: Plate LIX in T Gregory, *Excavations in Thetford, 1980-1982, Fison Way* (1992)



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